

The Random Joottings of Donald Jay from Nelson in Pendle.
Worsthorne Stocks,

In the quaint village of Worsthorne, an ancient relic from Saxon times stood tall and formidable—the stocks. These wooden structures served as a punishment for unruly gamblers and drunkards who had the misfortune of crossing paths with the village constable or churchwarden. Among the miscreants who found themselves in the stocks were three individuals known as Cheetham, Cracker, and Stitch. Please excuse the use of their vernacular names, as during those times, locating someone by their given name was often a challenge.

A captivating tale is associated with the stocks in this village, involving a man named Jack Balding. Jack was an ardent admirer of John Barleycorn, but his fondness for alcohol had long surpassed the boundaries of moderation. It was not long before Old Jim o'th Halstead, the village constable, caught Jack red-handed in the act and promptly presented him before the authorities. Consequently, Jack was sentenced to an hour in the stocks as punishment.

Old Jim, exercising his privilege of choosing the hour of Jack's torment, cunningly waited for the perfect opportunity to put a damper on Jack's spirits. He selected a bitterly cold winter's day and proceeded to collar Jack, leading him triumphantly to his frigid fate. With legs elevated at an uncomfortable angle, sitting on a cold flagstone with no reprieve, the hour of punishment seemed anything but pleasant for poor Jack.

Satisfied with his accomplishment, Old Jim locked Jack securely in the stocks and proudly marched away, relishing the thought of a warm and hearty dinner. Left to his own devices, Jack sat there, shivering and miserable, with no hope of warmth or sustenance. However, fortune had a surprise in store for him.

One of Jack's sympathetic friends discreetly slipped a bottle of good old rum into his pocket, the result of a collection made among those who sympathized with his plight. Jack, upon discovering the hidden treasure, wasted no time in indulging in its comforting contents. The warm and inviting liquid brought a momentary respite from the cold, and Jack swiftly descended into a state of blissful oblivion.

Meanwhile, a mischievous onlooker hatched a plan to add some spice to Old Jim's day. Hastily rushing off, as if something terrible had occurred, he arrived at the constable's location breathless with excitement. "Quick! You've finally done it right! Poor Jack has starved to death. You're sure to be hanged for subjecting him to this freezing day," he exclaimed dramatically. Dropping his knife and fork in alarm, Old Jim replied, "Surely, you're not telling the truth?" "I swear it! Come and see for yourself," the mischievous informant retorted.

Without a second thought, the worried constable dashed off to investigate the dire situation. Upon reaching the stocks, he gingerly lifted Jack's heavy head, only to have it thud back down with a resounding thwack when he released his grip. A crowd had gathered, reveling in the comedic turn of events, though Old Jim's thoughts were consumed by visions of Lancaster Castle and his imminent punishment.

Desperately, he cried out, "What on earth should I do?"

"Get him some brandy!" shouted one helpful bystander. "Hurry, bring him to the lower pub. We'll give him the best we have, and I'll foot the bill," suggested another, a mischievous smile playing on his lips.

The constable wasted no time in accepting their advice. Jack, now hoisted high on their shoulders, was carried to the designated establishment. In no time at all, the room at the Bay Horse pub echoed with merry laughter at the expense of Old Jim o'th' Halstead.

And so, amidst the raucous merriment, the constable learned a valuable lesson about the power of rumors and the unpredictable nature of circumstances. The stocks, once an instrument of punishment, became the catalyst for an amusing tale that would be shared and chuckled over for years to come in the village of Worsthorne.

By Donald Jay